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ABSTRACT

This study describes the syntactic features of Black English Vernacular (BEV) spoken by black characters in three black situation comedies on American television: "The Jeffersons," "Good Times," and "What's Happening." Using scripts and audio tapes of three episodes from each series during the 1977-78 television season, transcripts were made of each show and each show was coded for the presence of ten common syntactic features of BEV in naturalistic settings as described by sociolinguists. The results indicate that television is homogenizing the dialect. BEV, as spoken on television, tends to cluster in only three of the ten syntactic categories--auxiliary deletion, copula deletion, and negative concord--providing a limited dialect that does not correspond to BEV in naturalistic settings, but gives the impression of difference. Within this limited dialect, the use of BEV features tends to follow predicted use patterns based on the sociolinguistic findings: (1) males use BEV more frequently than females; (2) while most teenagers use BEV infrequently (unlike the sociolinguistic findings), teenage gang members are high BEV users; (3) low socio-economic status (SES) characters use BEV more frequently than high SES characters. Five tables are appended showing frequency of variants across categories and use of BEV by sex and age. (Author/AMH)

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Dialect Features in the Language of Black Characters on American Television Programming[1]

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Abstract

While television representations of minority groups have generated a heated controversy in recent years, little attention has been focused on the language use of minority characters. This study describes the syntactic features of Black English Vernacular (BEV) spoken by black characters in three black situation comedies on American television: THE JEFFERSONS, GOOD TIMES, and WHAT'S HAPPENING!! Using scripts and audio tapes of three episodes from each series during the 1977-78 television season, the authors made transcripts of each show and coded each for the presence of ten common syntactic features of BEV in naturalistic settings as described by sociolinguists.

The results indicate that television is homogenizing the dialect. BEV, as spoken on television, tends to cluster in only three of the ten syntactic categories--auxiliary deletion, copula deletion, and negative concord--providing a limited dialect which does not correspond to BEV in naturalistic settings, but gives the impression of difference. Within this limited dialect, the use of BEV features tends to follow predicted use patterns based on the sociolinguistic findings: (1) males use BEV more frequently than females; (2) while most teenagers use BEV infrequently (unlike the sociolinguistic findings), teenage gang members are high BEV users; (3) low SES characters use BEV more frequently than high SES characters.

The question of how to present minority groups in a mass medium in which those groups have no internal control is certainly not unique to American broadcasting, nor is it a new dilemma. This international question is as old as mass communication. Never a simple problem, it nevertheless has often incurred simplistic solutions. Cedric Clark writes, "As a mass medium of communication television is involved intimately with social conflict and control. . . . Three stages--non-recognition, ridicule, regulation--relate to whether members of certain groups are presented on television and how they are presented" (as quoted in Hobson, 1974, p. 185). Because of the arbitrary nature of their existence, the ifs and hows related to the presentations of minority characters in fictional series demand special attention as cultural indicators. Hypothetically, these presentations enjoy a special artistic license. Consequently, the expectations and restrictions surrounding these creations become recognizable through the forms the presentations themselves assume. The fictional characters that most Americans are most familiar with are those presented during the peak viewing hours, so it is not surprising that the "hierarchy of restraints" (Barnouw, 1975, p. 206) is at its pinnacle during this nightly three-hour period. Thus, narratives emanating from this conservative core epitomize the tension between theoretical freedom and practical control in commercial broadcasting.

In tracing the history of the televised, prime-time portrayals of America's largest racial minority, non-recognition, ridicule,

and regulation are helpful terms in describing general stages, but to imply progression from one stage to another is always the pattern of movement is questionable. Although in the very earliest period of American television there was a period of non-recognition of blacks in narrative series, by the early 1950s two popular radio shows featuring black characters, Beulah and Amos 'n Andy, became television series, transforming the general presentation style from non-recognition to ridicule. For both fame and infamy, The Amos 'n Andy show has no peers in American broadcasting history. As a radio show starring two white men impersonating Harlemites in vaudevillian "black voice," it was the longest running, most successful program in radio history. As a television show featuring black performers in the title roles, it was the first major program to be removed from network broadcasting as a result of organized protest against stereotypic and degrading minority presentations.

After broadcasting of both Amos 'n Andy and Beulah ceased in 1953, a few black supporting characters continued to appear in several other transposed radio shows, but these programs were short lived and television returned to non-recognition of blacks in continuing narratives for another decade. In the mid-60s a few black performers were cast in non-stereotypic continuing roles in weekly series, indicating signs of a changing presentation attitude. The casting of a black in a co-starring role as a secret agent in the adventure series I Spy in 1965 was heralded as a major breakthrough for minority presentations. Three years later, for the first time in fifteen years, a black woman starred

as the title character of a comedy series. Julia was not a maid as Beulah had been, but a nurse who functioned very well in an integrated, middle-class society. By the next season, the "race race" (Newsweek, 1968, p. 74) was on; of fifty-six prime-time shows, twenty-one had at least one regular black performer (Lemon, 1968, p. 42). Integration was the goal, assimilation the means; conflict between the races miraculously disappeared. In contrast to the rage exhibited by real blacks on the evening news, these fictional blacks fit smoothly into a predominately white world, absorbing the majority culture and doing their part to maintain law and order and support the status quo. Sexless and sacrificing (Chrisman, 1976, p. 7), the black male character of the late 60s was no longer ridiculed or pitied, but many saw the marks of regulation. Even to those who viewed the changes as progress, the possibility of a trade-off of racial identity for social and economic status surfaced. Had the result of an attempt to transcend race been a denial of black experience? In erasing racial differences that had formerly been mocked had television erased racial identity? Many Americans joined with the Black Consciousness Movement in asking: What price integration?

In the early 70s the social realities of integration were confronted in the then startling "realistic" comedies of producers Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin. Black characters returned to the ghettos and to integrated lower middle-class neighborhoods on prime-time. For the first time since the early 50s, comedy series with predominantly black casts reappeared. To many, the move away from the black fantasy characters of the late 60s is a step

forward to a new stage of positive recognition of racial diversity and an honest confrontation of social tensions. To others, the blue collar comedies with their white middle-class ethics are subtle forms of regulation and co-optation of blacks into the majority culture. To still others, the comedies represent a circuitous route back to the old days of ridicule through the sensationalizing of serious social issues. The fact that all of the weekly black series of the 70s that have survived more than a single season have been comedies is seen as proof that there is still not a mass audience for the continuing, serious, admirable presentation of black characters. These critics contend that comedies provide an environment in which mockery of difference can cohabitate with empathy.

Never the unique concern of broadcaster and professional critic, the presentation of minority groups on television has become a social and political issue to a growing number of Americans. In an age of expanded civil rights, burgeoning ethnic and racial awareness, and active consummerism, the roles of critic and public have interlocked and splintered into complicated configurations. A cacophony of voices in varying degrees of intensity, volume, and authority has expressed disapproval over stereotypic television portrayals of minorities, culminating in the 1977 report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights. Yet despite the vociferous complaints regarding minority presentations in general, almost no attention has been paid to the linguistic behavior of these characters. Why so many critical voices are silent on this important aspect of character development might stem from the general unconcern for language

analysis in television research. A second possibility is that a combination of guilt, confusion, and disinterest has led to public non-recognition of a black dialect for many white Americans. To many, any suggestion of a "racial" dialect sounds racist and retrograde, a reminder of the insidious "thick lips" theory and dialect caricature. The association of difference and deficit is entrenched in mainstream American attitudes toward language use. Probably nowhere is this association more acute than among public school teachers of English, resulting in an intense, decade-long controversy regarding language teaching strategies for speakers of non-standard dialects. To black nationalists, black dialect has strong positive connotations. Dialect use is encouraged as an important facet of racial solidarity and identity. Predictably, black integrationist groups like the NAACP reject the maintainance of a "black English" (reprinted in Burling, 1973, pp. 109-10), see language as the last barrier to integration, and recommend the hurdling of that barrier.

Supposedly, linguists approach the topic from an apolitical perspective, avoiding both the euphonistic and the euphoric. In recent years, many American sociolinguists have studied the language of black Americans (Burling, 1973; Dale, 1972; Dillard, 1973; Labov, 1972a, 1972b; Nist, 1974; Smitherman, 1977; Stewart, 1970; Wolfram, 1969). The difficulty of handling this sensitive topic as a cultural relativist is succinctly demonstrated in the changing terminology of one of America's most outstanding linguistic scholars, William Labov. Since he first began describing the dialect of blacks over a decade ago, Labov has shifted his

descriptive terminology for the same linguistic phenomenon from Negro Non-Standard English to Black English to Black English Vernacular. Labov now describes BEV as the "relatively uniform dialect spoken by the majority of black youth in most parts of the U.S. today. . . [also] used in the casual, intimate speech of many adults" (1972a, p. xiii). Dillard (1973) has remained consistent in his use of the term Black English to describe the "language of about 80% of Americans of African ancestry" (p. ix). Dillard sees this black language community as consisting of members of "a certain socio-economic group" (p. 11). While Black English is Smitherman's most common descriptor, she also uses the terms Black Dialect, Black Language, and Black Idiom to describe the system "used by 80 to 90 percent of American blacks, at least some of the time" (1977, p. 2). Although Smitherman is often imprecise in her descriptions of exactly who speaks the dialect when, her analysis of the ambivalence many blacks feel toward the dialect is lucid and poignant. Any discussion of Black English should remain sensitive to the push-pull dynamics of "the complex sociolinguistic situation that continues to exist in Black America" (Smitherman, 1977, p. 11).

Certainly there must be a considerable push-pull dynamic in motion, albeit a publicly undiscussed one, in the complex socio-linguistic situation that exists in the Black America created by television production companies. Thus, the central research question of this study becomes: What is the linguistic correspondence between the speech of the black Americans presented on prime-time television series and the black American speakers described

by sociolinguists in natural settings?

Research Hypotheses

In a previous study on the use of Black English Vernacular (BEV) syntax in black situation comedies (Fine, Anderson, & Eckles, 1978), the authors found that television was homogenizing the dialect. In three major black situation comedies of the 1975-76 television season,[2] the total number of BEV variants and their relativefrequencies per total turns within shows was low. The mean frequency of BEV variants per total turns across all shows was only .13.

The data revealed some interesting patterns. BEV variants, as infrequently as they did occur, tended to cluster in four areas: present tense markers, auxiliary and copula deletion, and negative concord. Males tended to dominate the shows, taking more total turns at speaking and using more BEV variants per total turns than did females. Characters in the lowest social positions, e.g., a locker room attendant, an escaped convict, and a maid, had the highest frequencies of BEV use, while the character in the highest social position had one of the lowest frequencies of BEV use. Only one character, the father, James Evans, of the GOOD TIMES family, demonstrated a consistently high frequency of BEV use.

Based on the results of the previous study and research on BEV in naturalistic settings, four research hypotheses were formulated for this study:

(1) The overall frequency of BEV variants will be relatively low across all shows.

(2) Variants will cluster in four areas: present tense markers, auxiliary and copula deletion, and negative concord.

(3) The overall frequency of BEV variants will be higher for male speakers than female speakers.

(4) As a group, teenage males will have the highest overall frequency of BEV variants.

Method

Materials

The present study is a replication of the first study. For the present study, the authors taped three episodes of each of three different American prime-time situation comedies which have primarily black casts.

GOOD TIMES, a comedy which often deals with serious social issues, had its season premier in September 1974. The GOOD TIMES series focuses on a lower class black family living in a Chicago housing project. THE JEFFERSONS, which began its first full season in January 1975, is a comedy about an upwardly mobile black couple in New York who have moved from a black ghetto, to an integrated lower middle-class district, and, finally, to a predominantly white luxury apartment in mid-town Manhattan. WHAT'S HAPPENING!!, the newest of the three situation comedies, became a weekly series in January 1977. The series portrays the comic adventures of three lower middle-class black teenage males, their families and friends, in Los Angeles.

Written transcripts of each show were made based on audio tapes and scripts provided by TAT Communications Company and TOY Productions.

Procedures

Ten of the most common, e.e., most often cited in the literature, syntactic features of BEV found in naturalistic settings

were used for coding purposes: (1) deletion of the past tense marker of the verb, e.g., "passed"="pass;" (2) deletion of the -s suffix for the third person present tense, e.g., "he runs home"= "he run home;" (3) deletion of the auxiliary verb, e.g., "do you hear"="you hear;" (4) deletion of the copula, e.g., "you are tired"= "you tired;" (5) use of "be" to mean either habituation or future action[3], e.g., "he be working" or "she be coming tomorrow;" (6) negative concord, e.g., "don't nobody know nothing;" (7) plural subject with singular form of "be," e.g., "they is;" (8) deletion of the -s suffix marking the possessive, e.g., "John's book"="John book;" (9) deletion of the -s suffix marking the plural, e.g., "whole lotta song;" and (10) use of a pleonastic subject, e.g., "John, he live in New York."

In the present study the non-standard variant "ain't" was added as an eleventh category, but instances of use were not included in the BEV totals or figured in the frequency computations. While the results of the first study indicated low overall frequencies of BEV variants per utterance, the authors felt that much of the dialogue on the coded shows gave the impression of non-standard speech, and that this non-standardness could be accounted for by the use of non-standard syntax generally associated with low socio-economic status speakers rather than specifically with BEV. While BEV speakers often substitute "ain't" for "didn't," the use of "ain't" as a contraction of "am not" is a slang feature of Standard English (SE) rather than a unique variant of BEV. Wright (1977) says that "non-standard is so potent that one feature can pull an utterance into the non-standard area." The frequent use of "ain't"

as a slang contraction, therefore, might provide the impression of BEV to the untrained listener. Because of the confusion between the use of "ain't" as a BEV feature and as slang, adding "ain't" to the list of categories to be coded seemed useful.

Since the transcripts revealed that a number of BEV variants were added between working scripts and final broadcasts, coders also marked each variant as scripted or non-scripted.

Coding categories were limited to syntactic variants of BEV for several reasons. Dillard (1973) says that syntax is "the area in which the analysis of Black English is most revealing"(p. 40). Stewart (1970) agrees and further argues that most research on BEV has emphasized lexicon and phonology at the expense of syntax, and thus has glossed over some essential differences between BEV and SE. Syntax is "relatively rigid and fixed over time"(Smitherman, 1977, p. 6) primarily because it remains below the average speaker's awareness and is, therefore, less likely to be manipulated (Dillard, 1973). Also, while phonology tends to be regionally bounded (Dillard, 1973), Labov (1972) found that BEV grammar was essentially the same throughout both urban and rural areas of the North and South. Lexicon was eliminated from the study because BEV lexicon is too easily confounded with ethnic slang, which Dillard (1973) says "receives more attention than it deserves"(p. 240).

Although the coding categories include only syntactic features of BEV, it is impossible to completely ignore phonological features. Several BEV features show an intersection between phonology and syntax (Wolfram, 1969) and any separation between the two is merely a "convenient fiction according to which any scholarly

discipline occasionally has to proceed"(Dillard, 1973, p. 67). For example, the absence of the final consonant /d/ sound in "passed," such that "passed"="pass," creates the following structure: "Yesterday, he pass the ball." It is impossible for a coder to know whether this particular surface structure is the product of an underlying phonological structure, or the product of a non-redundant verb transformation which eliminates the obligatory rule in SE to tense verbs. For the purposes of this study, coders marked all features which have an intersection between phonology and syntax as syntactic.

Coding was limited to utterances by black speakers. An utternace was defined as a turn at talking. An individual utterance, therefore, might contain multiple linguistic environments where BEV would be possible or no potential BEV linguistic environments. Coders tallied the total number of utterances per speaker and marked each utterance in the final transcripts which fit one of the eleven categories. If an utterance contained more than one variant, each variant was coded in its category.

Intercoder reliability for each category was established using a script of THE JEFFERSONS from a previous season. The intraclass correlation among K series yielded a .97 coefficient and the intraclass correlation of a sum or average yielded a .99 coefficient.

Results

Hypothesis 1 was confirmed. The overall frequency of BEV variants per total turns across all shows is .11. Across shows within series, WHAT'S HAPPENING!! has the lowest frequency with .07,

GOOD TIMES is next with .09, and THE JEFFERSONS has the highest frequency with .16. If category 3 is redefined to exclude the marginal variant of the substitution of "got" for "have," the frequencies for each show decrease by .02, and the overall frequency of BEV variants per total turns across all shows is only .09.

Variants were found to cluster, but only in categories 3, 4, and 6 (see Tables 1-3). Unlike the first study, there was not a significant number of deletions of the -s suffix marking the third person present tense. Categories 3, 4, and 6 account for 89% of all variants in the shows. Category 3 alone accounts for 50% of all variants, although the substitution of "got" for "have" accounts for 46% of the 142 examples of auxiliary deletion found. There were no examples of deletion of the past tense marker or deletion of the -s suffix marking the possessive. There were two examples of the deletion of the -s suffix marking the plural and one example of a pleonastic noun construction. While the first study yielded no examples of the use of "be" to indicate habituation, the current results show five instances of the variant, although four of those are due to the expansion of category 5 to include "be" as an indicator of future action. Hypothesis 2, then, is partially confirmed.

Hypothesis 3 is confirmed across all shows. Males use BEV variants twice as often as females do. The overall frequency of BEV variants per total turns for males is .14, while the frequency for females is .07. In the first study, females accounted for 37% of the turns but only 22% of the BEV variants. In the current study, females account for 47% of the turns and 30% of the BEV

variants. Although females talk more frequently than they used to, they continue to use BEV infrequently.

Hypothesis 3 is only partially confirmed within individual series (see Table 4). Males and females have identical frequencies of .07 for all three episodes of WHAT'S HAPPENING!!, even though females take only 43% of the total turns. One female in a continuing role in the series, however, has the most frequent use of BEV among both males and females--.15--which inflates the mean frequency for females.

Males and females differ only slightly in their use of BEV in the GOOD TIMES series although females have 60% of the speaking turns. The frequency of BEV variants per total turns for females is .09, while the frequency for males is .10. The results are again skewed, however, by one female in a starring role who has a mean frequency of .15 for all three episodes.

The most dramatic difference between male and female use of BEV is in THE JEFFERSONS, where the frequency of BEV variants per total turns in all three episodes for males is .25, while the frequency for females is .03. The low frequency of use of BEV by females is accentuated by the fact that one female, in two episodes, has a mean frequency of .12. Infrequent use of BEV by females in THE JEFFERSONS cannot be accounted for by lack of opportunity; although females had 41% of the speaking turns, they contributed only 9% of the BEV variants.

Hypothesis 4 is only slightly confirmed across all shows. The frequency of BEV variants per total turns for teenagers is .12; the adult frequency is .11; and the frequency for children is .02.

The extremely low frequency for children can be partially accounted for by the few children appearing in the shows--3--and their infrequent turns at speaking--children account for only 7% of the speaking turns. The low frequency for children is primarily determined by two female children with continuing roles on GOOD TIMES and WHAT'S HAPPENING!!, who, in all five episodes in which they appear, use no BEV variants.

Within each series, however, the data for hypothesis 4 reveal a very different pattern (see Table 5). The hypothesis is disconfirmed for both WHAT'S HAPPENING!! and GOOD TIMES. GOOD TIMES has only one teenager for all episodes. His frequency of BEV use is only .06, while the frequency for all adults on GOOD TIMES is .11. This character, however, speaks only 65 times, accounting for only 8% of all speaking turns. Teenagers on WHAT'S HAPPENING!! account for 47% of all speaking turns, yet their frequency of BEV use is only .07. Adults in the series account for only 42% of the speaking turns, with a .10 frequency of BEV use.

Hypothesis 4 is confirmed for THE JEFFERSONS. Teenagers here have 19% of the speaking turns and use 34% of the BEV variants. The frequency of BEV use for teenagers is .28, while the frequency for adults is .13.

The results of coding for the non-standard variant "ain't" yielded 54 instances on THE JEFFERSONS, 11 instances on GOOD TIMES, and no instance on WHAT'S HAPPENING!! All of the utterances which include "ain't" substitute the contraction for "am not" rather than "didn't," thus justifying the assumption that the use of "ain't" on these shows follows the syntactic pattern of the non-standard

vernacular rather than BEV.

Within the ten coded categories of BEV, 59% of all variants were non-scripted. THE JEFFERSONS has the highest percentage of scripted variants, 64%. BEV variants on both WHAT'S HAPPENING!! and GOOD TIMES, however, are more frequently non-scripted, 78% and 81% of the variants respectively.

Discussion

Homogenization of BEV

The continued homogenization of BEV on American television is difficult to interpret. It may well reflect an unwillingness on the part of either the producers or the audience to accept BEV as a legitimate language choice. On the other hand, homogenization of the dialect may be a reflection of the increasing decreolization of BEV taking place in the larger society, and of a push by American blacks towards integration into white mainstream culture and away from the racial identity movement of the early 1970s. The issue is confounded by the question of mutual intelligibility and the mass audience. If prime-time television demands a mass audience, the majority of that audience is unfamiliar with BEV, espcially in its densest form. The producers are, thus, placed in the bind of creating shows for the majority which are understandable only to the minority. And even if the dialect is mutually intelligible, it has so long been stigmatized by the majority culture, that the use of BEV by black characters may automatically doom them to an inferior status.

Studies on the relationship between language and attitude, however, indicate that other variables can intervene in the percep-

tion process (Piche, Michlin, Rubin, & Sullivan, 1977; Seligman, Tucker, & Lambert, 1972). Cultural attitudes, therefore, might be changed if the dialect is used more frequently by characters viewers admire and identify with for qualities other than language choices.

Of the three black series in the study, WHAT'S HAPPENING!!, with the lowest frequency of BEV variants, appears to be the "whitest" according to one satiric review, the black HAPPY DAYS (Silverstone, 1978, p. 43).

GOOD TIMES, on the other hand, while having a low use of BEV, still retains some aspects of racial integrity through the use of black rhetorical style. JJ, the eldest son on the series, and Willona, the show's featured adult female, both often use rhyming couplets, for example, "Honey, if I keep on keepin' on, Neiman-Marcus, watch your carcass!" JJ also uses much of the fancy talk typical of black males (Abrahams, 1970; Dillard, 1973; Smitherman, 1977). And in one show, JJ and his younger brother Michael, engage in a verbal duel to determine which of them is the "quietest."

While the overall frequency of BEV use remains relatively low on THE JEFFERSONS, it is considerably higher than on the other two series. THE JEFFERSONS, like GOOD TIMES, also presents characters familiar with black oral traditions. The maid, Florence, tells a traditional trickster story (Abrahams, 1970) as a form of advice on how to gain a promotion, and the teenage gang members on one episode participate in sounding or ritual insults (Kochman, 1972), thus demonstrating their allegiance to the street code of the badman hero (Abrahams, 1970).

The fact that the use of BEV tends to cluster in only three categories further adds to the homogenization process. Only two years after the data for the first study were collected, another BEV variant drops out of the linguistic picture we have of television blacks. Tensing is a non-obligatory rule in BEV as compared with SE (Dillard, 1973), yet black television characters now tend to follow the SE obligatory form. The use of "be" to mark either habitual or future action, although the most distinctive difference between SE and BEV (Dillard, 1973; Smitherman, 1977), is heard only 5 times in 2647 turns. Two of the categories of frequently used variants contain numerous marginal examples of the variants, i.e., examples which are technically BEV variants but in actuality are closer to the standard vernacular and give the impression that blacks don't know how to talk "right white." Although the deletion of the auxiliary verb is, by far, the most frequently heard variant on television, the examples of auxiliary deletion are most often the deletion of "have" or "had" when using "got" as a verb substitute for "have," a form often used by speakers of the standard vernacular. The use of marginal examples is also true for the majority of instances of negative concord. While negative concord is a BEV variant, it is multiple negation rather than the double negative which best characterizes the BEV negation rule (Labov, 1972a; Smitherman, 1977). Yet all but six of our examples of negative concord are of double negatives.

As found in the previous study, the language heard on these shows is a limited dialect, one that does not correspond to BEV in naturalistic settings, but gives the impression of difference.

Use of BEV by Sex

The differences found between male and female use of BEV reveal the traditional portrait of black women as the keepers of the standard language (Labov, 1972b). Although black women on the coded shows talk more frequently today than two years ago, that talk remains of the standard variety. Women on THE JEFFERSONS, in particular, are portrayed as models of linguistic correctness, in sharp contrast to their male counterparts. Louise plays "straight" both linguistically and comedically to the rapping and sounding of her husband George.

One interesting new phenomenon on these shows is the introduction of the black "princess," Dee of WHAT'S HAPPENING!! and Penny of GOOD TIMES. Penny and Dee speak perfect SE; not only do they never use BEV, they also stress the grammar of SE, a scripted "you're" becomes a delivered "you are." Dwayne and Rerun, two of the teenage boys in the WHAT'S HAPPENING!! cast, mock Dee's "correct" grammar when she asks them to enter the room like gentlemen. Dwayne's typical entrance line of "hey, hey, hey" changes to "hey, hey, and hey," and Rerun responds with "What is happening?" rather than his usual "What's happenin'?" Penny's use of SE is particularly unusual since she is a former battered child whose mother abandoned her in the ghetto.

Only three female characters use BEV variants with any regularity: Shirley of WHAT'S HAPPENING!!--a waitress with little formal schooling; Florence of THE JEFFERSONS--the Jefferson's maid who trades insults with George; and Willona of GOOD TIMES. Florence and Shirley have license to break the traditional pattern

of male and female differences since they both have little education and low status occupations; for these characters status grading is more salient than sex grading. Willona is the most positive female personality on any of the three series. Although Willona is "gittin ovuh" (Smitherman, 1977) to the good life of the middle-class, she continues to use BEV as part of her flamboyant personal style and racial identity. Also, all three women with the highest frequencies of BEV use are single women who, unlike the other females, do not function predominantly in the roles of wives, mothers, daughters, or sisters.

There are moments, however, when even the most standard female speakers lapse into BEV. These lapses tend to occur at points of emotional tension. Louise angrily says to her husband George during one show, "Because you don't think there's no one on earth who can do your job as well as you"(THE JEFFERSONS, script #0413, p. 16; underlining ours). And Thelma of GOOD TIMES, during an argument with her college roommates over the payment of a telephone bill, responds with "I didn't make no call to no Bowlie, Oklahoma"(GOOD TIMES, script #0506, p. 36; underlining ours). Interestingly, both of these examples were scripted in SE form, but delivered on the final broadcast in BEV.

Use of BEV by Age

Research indicates that urbanteenage males tend to be the highest users of BEV (Labov, 1972a). The three teenage boys who star in WHAT'S HAPPENING!! should, then, be among the most frequent users of BEV on all three series, if their portrayals are to be an accurate representation of black urban youth. Contrary to expecta-

tion, however, Raj, Rerun, and Dwayne are among the least frequent users of the dialect. Although visually presented as part of an all black world, the teenagers of WHAT'S HAPPENING!! are linguistically assimilated into a white world which insists that three nice black kids from Los Angeles talk like everybody else, everybody else who's white.

In contrast, linguistic similarity is not expected of the teenage gang members whom Jenny Jefferson interviews for her sociology project on THE JEFFERSONS. These teenagers are killers, part of the violent world of the ghetto street culture. Their frequent use of BEV emphasizes their isolation from the mainstream culture. One teenager on THE JEFFERSONS represents the young ghetto male in transition. Marcus, the high school boy who works for George and introduces Jenny, George's daughter-in-law, to the Black Widows, has embraced middle-class values as a way out of the ghetto, but he still retains the dialect as part of his racial identity and maintains his friendship with members of his former gang.

Michael, the teenage brother of Thelma and JJ on GOOD TIMES, is a particularly ambivalent character. His age, militant politics, and low socio-economic status, add up to the picture of the typical high BEV user. But Michael is intelligent, the sibling who dreams of becoming a lawyer. The portrayal of Michael as a poor but intelligent ghetto kid who uses standard syntax lends credence to the popular myth that BEV is a sub-standard form of English spoken only by unintelligent blacks.

Use of BEV by Socio-economic status

Although Smitherman (1977) says that there are some grammatical structures black speakers have in common despite social class, most sociolinguists agree that BEV is a social dialect in which class distinctions predominate. Dillard (1973) writes that "a certain socio-economic group--not all Blacks--speak the dialect"(p. 11). Linguistically and dramatically, an interesting situation presents itself when a member of that "certain" group moves into another group less likely to use the dialect. And the more rapid the move, the more interesting the situation.

THE JEFFERSONS centers on the dilemma of upward mobility. The fictious George Jefferson, like many real black Americans, has changed socio-economic class in the last decade(Delaney, 1978). George grew up in the Harlem ghetto, yet in Horatio Alger style, he now owns a chain of drycleaning stores, drinks scotch and votes Republican. A bigoted black bourgeoisie, George maintains a complex love-hate relationship with the white world. It is George, not any of the blacks who still live in low income housing, who has the highest frequency of BEV for a major character across the three series. His relatively high use of BEV could support several character interpretations. One might be that it indicates his conscious unwillingness to reject his black heritage and completely accomodate himself to a majority culture. Thus, his use of BEV could function as both an acceptance of black culture and a rejection of white mores. Another explanation might be that George is inept in his new social and exonomic position and his unconscious, inappropriate use of BEV adds to the comedy and to his

general portrayal as the classic fool. The notion that the two rationales are intertwined is a third possibility and perhaps the strongest one, for the show's attitude toward George is extremely ambivalent. Like Archie Bunker, George is a lovable bigot.

In an episode in which George takes a ghetto teenager camping, George and Marcus have the highest BEV frequencies of any two major characters across all nine episodes of the three series (George=.33; Marcus=.30). In a scene of self disclosure the dialect functions as both a racial and a class bond as the two compare similar childhoods and George obviously functions as a replacement father figure for Marcus. The concept of class code is intensified when a white backwoodsman appears at their camp. If coded using the same procedure as was used for the speech of black characters, the utterances of the white countryboy would have a frequency of .40. This fact lends credence to the suspicion that on television BEV is treated "as an amalgam of non-standard features, identical to non-prestige features of white dialects" (Dillard, 1973, pp. 60-61). By rarely introducing the variants of BEV which are almost exclusively used by blacks, television presents BEV not as a dialect with linguistic integrity, but merely as the high density of otherwise widely occurring, and usually stigmatized, forms. Both the white backwoodsman and George are frequent users of "ain't" to replace "am not," which is probably the most recognizable non-standard form in American English.

Use of BEV as a class marker is also evident in the portrayal of Helen Willis, an educated black woman who has long been a member of the upper middle-class and is married to a white

publisher. Except for the presence of one marginal variant, Helen's speech is free of BEV. Helen epitomizes the middle-class black who differs phonologically and grammatically from the ethnic group, but who wishes to retain some linguistic similarity and, therefore, relies on ethnic slang to provide the link (Dillard, 1973). Although sociolinguists have pointed out that ethnic slang is not the same as BEV (Stewart, 1970), it is "that part of non-standard language which is most nearly above the threshold of awareness; a legion of popular writers have noticed it and mistaken it for the ghetto language"(Dillard, 1973, p. 240). In recent years use of black slang has gone from adventuresome to acceptable to obligatory for fashionable middle-class Americans. Although some of the vocabulary of black jazz musicians has been familiar to many white Americans since the commercial exploitation of jazz in the 1920s, Dillard (1977) sees "the attitudinal change that made the Black vocabulary from something almost unknown into a part of almost general American English usage" as the "result of an important sociological phenomenon, the revolt of middle-class youth in the 1960s"(pp. 133-4). Consequently, there is no challenge to Helen's socio-economic status when she says to her friend, Louise Jefferson, who's wearing a white facial mask, "Girl, you can really get down. . . for a honkey"(THE JEFFERSONS, script #0409, p. 33; underlining ours).

Use of Scripted and Non-scripted BEV

The lack of conscious awareness of syntactic structure and the ambivalence many blacks and whites feel toward BEV might be illustrated in the significant percentage of BEV variants that seem

to be spontaneous on these broadcasts. Of course, authorship of individual utterances, not to mention decisions on delivery, cannot be traced with precision in such a communal effort as a television production, but the changes themselves are available for analysis and conjecture on genesis. Although television scripting is an evolutionary process, final script and broadcast audio provide two discrete stages. A comparison of the two revealed that the low as-broadcast BEV frequencies of the shows were actually much higher than the scripted use of BEV. For example, Willona of GOOD TIMES, the adult female character with the highest BEV frequency on a single episode (.20 on episode #0522) was scripted only 3 of her 33 uses of BEV across three episodes. Thelma, also of GOOD TIMES, had no BEV variants in two episodes. In a third, which featured Thelma and centered around her disgust with her living conditions, she delivered ten BEV variants, only one of which was scripted. The possibility that there is an association of spontaneous use of the dialect with a context of emotional intensity is also illustrated when Mr. Nelson of WHAT'S HAPPENING!! delivers six unscripted (and only one scripted) BEV variants. This character, a politician who has full control over standard forms, uses unscripted BEV in moments of intimacy with his son Dwayne. It seems possible that in all these instances black performers have relied on their personal linguistic resources to create characters who are more bidialectal in presentation than in scripted form, thus in keeping with the strong oral tradition of BEV.

Another interesting aspect of non-scripted delivery is the change of negative concord from a scripted double negative to a

delivered multiple negative. Smitherman (1977) points out that the double negative is "in abundant use among whites today, but triple and quadruple negatives are the sole province of Africanized English"(p. 30). There were no scripted multiple negatives in any of the nine shows. When a scripted "This ain't no day care center for honkies"(THE JEFFERSONS, script #0409, p. 33; underlining ours) is delivered "This ain't no day care center for no honkies"(underlining ours), it is obvious that someone has demonstrated an understanding, although very possibly an unconscious one, of the BEV syntactic rule structure that demands the negation of all indefinite positions(Burling, 1973). The broadcast examples of "be" for habituation, the deletion of the -s suffix marking the plural, and the use of the pleonastic noun, although few in number, were all non-scripted variants, again indicating a familiarity with BEV among cast members. There are also changes in the other direction, utterances that are scripted BEV, yet delivered SE. These changes are not significant numerically (4 instances each on GOOD TIMES and WHAT'S HAPPENING!! and 7 instances on THE JEFFERSONS), but they again demonstrate the push-pull dynamic regarding BEV that exists in the complex environment of commercial programming.

Conclusion

The general strategy of "black, but not too black" is well illustrated in the homogenization of BEV on these shows. Whether viewers, however, consider this homogenized dialect or any dialogue heard on television to be representative of language in natural settings is problematic. The only published research in this area, a study by Greenberg (1972), indicates that children who have the

least exposure to blacks in natural settings are the most likely to regard television as their major source of information on how blacks talk. More than half--68%--of the rural white children interviewed by Greenberg (compared to 38% of the suburban white children and 24% of the urban white children) said that they use television as their main information source on black language. It is probable that this group would be the least likely to understand dialect spoken in high density, due to their unfamiliarity with it; it is possible that this same group would be most likely to regard the dialect as sub-standard. As shows are produced which feature bi-dialectical black characters of various social, economic, and educational backgrounds speaking BEV in private and public situations of both comedy and seriousness, the burden of representation on black characters in these situation comedies will decrease. Until then, they bear a special burden.

Footnotes

[1]The authors thank Virginia Carter of TAT Communications and Bud Yorkin of TOY Productions for their assistance in this project. The following quotations are reprinted with permission from Tandem Productions and TAT Communications Company:

"Honey, if I keep on keepin' on, Neiman-Marcus, watch your carcass," p. 16, from GOOD TIMES #0523, written by Michael G. Moye. Copyright 1978. Tandem Productions, Inc.

"I didn't make no call to no Bowlie, Oklahoma," p. 19, from GOOD TIMES #0506, written by Kim Weiskopf & Michael Baser. Copyright 1977. Tandem Productions, Inc.

"Because you don't think there's no one on earth who can do your job as well as you," p. 19, from THE JEFFERSONS #0413, written by Roger Shulman & John Baskin. Copyright 1977. TAT Communications Company.

"Girl, you can really get down. . .for a honkey," p. 23, from THE JEFFERSONS # 0409, written by Jay Moriarty & Mike Milligan. Copyright 1977. TAT Communications Company.

"This ain't no day care center for /no/ honkies," p. 25, from THE JEFFERSONS #0424, written by Paul M. Belous & Robert Wolterstorff. Copyright 1978. TAT Communications Company.

[2]The shows included in the first study were SANFORD AND SON, GOOD TIMES, and THE JEFFERSONS.

[3]The original study included only the use of "be" for habituation. Smitherman (1977), however, includes "be" to indicate future action in her discussion of the characteristic uses of the copula in BEV, and concludes that "the most distinctive differences in the structure of Black Dialect are patterns using "be" (p. 19). Expansion of category 6 to include "be" for future action seems justified, therefore.

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Table 1: Frequency of Variants across Categories by Characters for GOOD TIMES

Episodes: #0506, #0522, and #0523
Key: ( ) = number of coded shows a character appeared in
C = character up to 12 years; T = 13-19 years; A = 20+ years
/ / = total number of turns speaking

* = unscripted BEV
** = scripted BEV
_____ divides male & female
═══ characters

Character	Categories														Total	Freq.		
	2*	2**	3*	3**	4*	4**	5*	5**	6*	6**	7*	7**	9*	9**			11*	11**
Michael (3) T /65/			2	1	1										4	.06		
Bookman (3) A /22/				1											1	.05		
JJ (2) A /79/			3	3	1				1		1				9	.11	3	
Frank (1) A /85/			3	3	4	1									11	.13	1	
Paul (1) A /21/			1				1								2	.10		
Bear (1) A /6/									2						2	.33	2	
JJ/Eugene (1) A /7/	1			1									1		3	.43		
Willona (3) A /216	1		18	1	3				4	2	4				33	.15	4	1
Thelma (3) A /168			5	1	1				2		1				10	.06		
Penny (3) C /52/															-	.00		
Totals: /790/[a]	2	-	32	11	10	1	1	-	9	2	6	-	1	-	75	.09	10	1

[a]Total includes turns of unlisted minor characters with no BEV variants.

Table 2: Frequency of Variants across Categories by Character for THE JEFFERSONS

Episodes: #0409, #0413, and # 0424
Key: ( ) = number of coded shows a character appeared in
C = character up to 12 years; T = 13-19 years; A = 20+ years
/ / = total number of turns speaking

* = unscripted BEV
** = scripted BEV
═══ divides male & female characters

Character	Categories 2*	2**	3*	3**	4*	4**	5*	5**	6*	6**	7*	7**	Total	Frequency	11*	11**
George (3) A /289/	3		7	17	8	4	1		8	16	2	1	67	.23	9	24
Marcus (2) T /90/	1		2	5	2	2			2	8	1	1	24	.27	1	7
Clarence (1) A /37/		1	2	1	2	1			1				8	.22		1
L.C. (1) T /20/				3									3	.12		
Slick (1) T /20/				3	2	1			1	1			8	.40	1	1
Rollo (1) T /18/	1		1	2	2				1	3			10	.56	1	3
Huey (1) C /14/					2					1			3	.21		1
Domino (1) T /10/				1									1	.10		
Louise (3) A /194/				2					1		1		4	.02		
Helen (3) A /47/				1									1	.02		
Florence (2) A /52/			1	3	1					1			6	.12		3
Jenny (1) A /55/				1									1	.02		
Totals: /853/[a]	5	1	13	39	17	19	1	-	14	30	3	3	136	.16	12	40

[a]Total includes turns of unlisted minor characters with no BEV variants.

Table 3: Frequency of Variants across Categories by Characters for WHAT'S HAPPENING!!

Episodes: #0208, #0212, and #0221
Key: ( ) = number of coded shows a character appeared in
C = character up to 12 years; T = 13-19 years; A = 20+ years
/ / = total number of turns speaking

* = unscripted BEV
** = scripted BEV
═══ divides male & female characters

Character	Categories																Total	Frequency
	2*	2**	3*	3**	4*	4**	5*	5**	6*	6**	7*	7**	9*	9**	10*	10**		
Dwayne (3) T /165/			2		3	1	1		1		1				1		10	.06
Raj (2) T /171/			11	3	1		1										16	.09
Rerun (2) /83/				2		1											3	.04
Mr. Nelson (1) A /55/			4	1	2												7	.13
Todd (1) A /45/			1	1													2	.04
Marvin (1) A /21/			2														2	.10
Ted (1) A /15/			1														1	.07
Shirley (2) A /146/	1		11	4	3		1		1				1				22	.15
Mama (2) A /116/	1			3	2						1						7	.06
Dee (2) C /112/																	-	.00
Connie (1) T /37/			1														1	.03
Diane (1) T /15/					1												1	.07
Totals: /1,004/[a]	2	-	33	14	12	2	3	-	2	-	2	-	1	-	1	-	72	.07

[a]Total includes turns of unlisted minor characters with no BEV variants.

Table 4

Use of BEV by Sex

Sex	Frequency of BEV Variants	Total Turns	% Total Turns	% BEV Variants
		GOOD TIMES		
Females	.09	477	60	57
Males	.10	313	40	43
		THE JEFFERSONS		
Females	.03	350	41	9
Males	.25	503	59	91
		WHAT'S HAPPENING!!		
Females	.07	429	43	43
Males	.07	575	57	57

Table 5

Use of BEV by Age

Age	Frequency of BEV Variants	Total Turns	% Total Turns	% BEV Variants
		GOOD TIMES		
Child (1-12 yrs.)	.00	52	7	0
Teenager (13-19 yrs.)	.06	65	8	5
Adult (20 yrs. +)	.11	674	85	95
		THE JEFFERSONS		
Child	.21	14	11	0
Teenager	.28	163	47	43
Adult	.13	676	42	57
		WHAT'S HAPPENING!!		
Child	.00	112	2	2
Teenager	.07	471	19	34
Adult	.10	421	79	64